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ABSTRACT

Demographic trends of marriage and childbearing early in adulthood and longer life spans have meant that many people become grandparents in middle age and are grandparents for 20 or 30 years. The relationship between grandparent and grandchild is mediated through the parent. This study examines the qualities that parents desire in grandparents and the relationship between parents' marital status and grandparent qualities. Study participants (N=79) were parents who were university undergraduates or patrons of day care centers, 57 of whom were married and 22 of whom were single. Participants answered questions on family background and open-ended questions on the best and worst things about grandparents and on qualities of the ideal grandparents. Responses to the open-ended questions were categorized. Parents cited grandparents' help and support as desirable and advising about or interfering in grandchildren's upbringing as undesirable. Single parents more often cited grandparents' support as desireable than did married parents which may indicate an evolving role for grandparents. Ideal grandparents were thought to have a warm relationship with grandchildren. Few responses referred to grandparents' involvement in discipline; parents only criticized grandparents' unwarranted discipline. Gender differences were found in specific grandparent activities but not in grandparent qualities. Married parents most often endorsed family solidarity. (ABL)

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MARRIED AND SINGLE PARENTS' VIEWS OF GRANDPARENTS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines parents' views of grandparents' family functions, and associations between these views and parents' marital status. Married (n=57) and single (n=22) parents described the best thing about having grandparents in the family, the worst thing about having grandparents in the family, the "ideal" grandmother, and the "ideal" grandfather. Verbatim responses to each question were coded into dissimilar categories, and Chi-square tests were used to identify associations between marital status and response categories. Marital status was associated with views of the best thing about having grandparents in a family. Single parents cited grandparents as sources of advice and support more often than did married parents. Married parents said that grandparents strengthened the family and offered life experience and knowledge of family heritage. Married and single parents agreed that grandparents' interference in childrearing was the worst thing about having grandparents in a family. Parents most often described the "ideal" grandmother and grandfather as individuals who had warm relationships with grandchildren; less frequent responses outlined roles characterized by activities with grandchildren for grandfathers and by support to parents for grandmothers. Implications for evolution of grandparental roles and for intergenerational socialization are discussed.

Married and Single Parents' Views of Grandparents:

A Content Analysis

During the 1980's, scholars of intergenerational relations have shown increased interest in the study of grandparenthood. Recent surveys inform us that most middle aged and older Americans have grandchildren and see at least some of their grandchildren daily or weekly (Harris & Associates, 1975). Because of long-term demographic trends toward marriage and childbearing occurring relatively early in adulthood, most individuals today become grandparents in their 40's or 50's, rather than in old age (e.g., Troll, 1980). This trend, together with life expectancy approaching 80 years, has meant that one can today realistically expect to be a grandparent for 20 - 30 years. Clearly, grandparenting is an experience affecting more people for longer periods of time than has ever before been true.

Furthermore, increased life expectancy has also meant that more families include living grandparents for longer periods of time than has ever before been true (e.g., Troll, 1980). Empirically-based knowledge of grandparenthood is, then, a topic of relevance not only to individual grandparents, but also to their families. One issue of interest in this respect is the means through which grandparents are prepared for their roles in the multigenerational family.

Researchers and theorists of intergenerational relations have posited that parents socialize both grandparents and grandchildren for their respective family roles (Atchley & Miller, 1980; Cohler & Grunebaum, 1980; Gorlitz, 1981; Kahana & Kahana, 1971; Troll, 1971; 1980; Troll et al, 1979). In a conceptual paper, Robertson (1975) provided the most extensive

discussion of ways in which parents might shape grandparents' behavior toward grandchildren and parents. Robertson proposed a model of eight dimensions of possible parental mediation: perceptions of the importance of grandparent-grandchild contact, perceptions of appropriate grandparent behavior, perceptions of appropriate behavior initiator, means of mediation, frequency of mediation, parents' attitude toward mediation, focus of mediation, and equity of mediation directed toward maternal and paternal grandparents.

Although Robertson's (1975) discussion did not include supporting empirical evidence, available data suggest that parents do indeed have a strong influence upon the character of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Gilford & Black (1972) questionned grandparents, parents, and young adult grandchildren about the functioning of their families. Respondents' reports suggested that parents' attitudes and behavior had influenced both grandparents' and grandchildren's views of their relationship, particularly when grandparent-grandchild contact was infrequent. However, these patterns of kin-oriented behavior were modified when grandparents and grandchildren saw one another often. Similarly, respondents in a subsequent survey of young adult grandchildren said that their parents had influenced the frequency and nature of their interaction with grandparents, as well as their attitudes towards grandparents (Robertson, 1976).

The findings of these studies support the notion that parents play an important part in establishing parameters of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Other studies of grandparenting, although not designed specifically to examine parental mediation of grandparent-grandchild relationships, have also yielded findings which suggest that parents

affect these bonds. In Neugarten & Weinstein's (1964) classic study of grandparenting, grandparents who were dissatisfied with grandparenting cited strain in relationships with the parental generation as one primary source of discomfort. Certainly, strain in parent-grandparent relationships could stem from an infinite number of sources. It is possible, however, that one source of strain was conflict over appropriate grandparent behavior.

In a recent qualitative study, Thomas (1982; 1985) conducted semi-structured interviews with grandparents. The grandparents in this study agreed upon appropriate and inappropriate grandparental functions. All wanted to help children and grandchildren whenever possible, and believed that helping was a family responsibility. Grandparents also agreed that, under most circumstances, they should not discipline their grandchildren or advise their own children about the grandchildren's upbringing. Grandparents were certain that their children shared their views of helping, disciplining, and advising; they said that they sometimes consciously refrained from advising or disciplining in order to avoid arousing their children's resentment. More recent quantitative research has also shown that helping, advising, and disciplining are issues of concern to grandparents; surprisingly, in this study grandfathers expressed a greater readiness to offer childrearing advice than did grandmothers (Thomas, in press; Thomas & Sanders, 1985).

Scholars agree on a conceptual level, then, that there is a process of socialization for grandparenthood and that parents are primary socialization agents. Furthermore, available data support this notion that parents affect grandparenting experience. However, there has not been research

designed to directly examine the process of socialization for grandparenthood, and the part that parents play in that process.

The purpose of this study was to examine parents' goals in the process of socialization for grandparenthood. More specifically, the study was designed to identify what qualities parents consider desireable and undesirable in grandmothers and grandfathers. If parents are in fact pivotal figures in a process of socialization for grandparenthood, then they should be able to articulate ideas of appropriate and inappropriate grandparental behavior. A second goal of this study was to examine associations between views of grandparental qualities and parents' marital status. Earlier research has shown that grandparents in single parent families are more often called upon to assist in the grandchildren's upbringing, and sometimes even function as surrogate parents (Sprey & Matthews, 1981). As the number of single parent households has increased dramatically, grandparenthood researchers are advised to include parents' marital status in design and analysis, in order to provide reasonably specific descriptions of multigenerational family functioning.

Earlier research on grandparents' views of their responsibilities and their perceptions of their children's views suggested two hypotheses. First, it was anticipated that parents would believe that grandparents' help was desireable, but that grandparents' advice and their involvement in grandchildren's discipline were undesirable. Second, it was hypothesized that grandfathers would be described as more prone to involvement -- even to the point of interference -- in grandchildren's upbringing than would grandmothers. A third hypothesis was that single parents would cite

grandparents' provision of help to children and grandchildren as a desireable quality more often than would married parents.

Earlier research examining grandparenthood in general and grandparental socialization in particular has relied upon self-reports from grandparents, parents, and/or grandchildren. In this study, parents responded to open-ended questions concerning their views of grandparents. As there have not been studies describing the actual process of socialization for grandparenthood, open-ended questionning was chosen as a means of identifying as much diversity as possible in parents' views of desireable and undesirable qualities in grandparents.

METHOD

Participants

Married (n = 57) and single (n = 22) parents who were university undergraduates or patrons of day care centers in the surrounding community volunteered their participation. Table 1 describes parents' demographic background. Seventy two women (51 married, 21 single) and seven men (six married, one single) participated. The mean age was 31, with an age range from 22 to 44. Two thirds were working outside of the home, and most were employed in white collar or professional positions. The modal level of education was some college coursework.

Insert Table 1 about here

The mean number of children was 1.91; single parents had significantly fewer children than did married parents, t (76) = 2.94, $p < .004$. Mean age of the oldest child was 8.52, and mean age of the youngest child was

5.57; single parents had significantly older youngest children than did married parents, t (76) = 2.39, $p < .02$. Most (55.4%) lived within 30 minutes travel of their own parents, and most (52.5%) also lived within 30 minutes travel of their spouse's or partner's parents. Over half (55.7%) had living grandparents, but none had grandchildren.

Procedures

Mail questionnaire packets were distributed to university undergraduates from the psychology laboratory, and to patrons of local day care centers during parents' meetings at the centers. Rosters of parents receiving questionnaires were also obtained on these occasions. Questionnaire packets included a cover letter explaining the purpose and nature of the study, an informed consent form, the questionnaire inquiring about family background and views of grandparents (described below), a set of demographic questions, and a postage paid return mail envelope. One week after receiving questionnaires, each parent was mailed a reminder postcard. Postcards thanked parents who had already completed and returned questionnaires and urged those who had not to do so promptly. Response rate was 83%.

The questionnaire included questions concerning family background (e.g., whether the respondent had living grandparents, parents' marital and employment statuses, proximity of parents and parents-in-law), as well as open-ended questions asking for the parent's views of grandparents. In response to these questions, each parent described (1) the best thing about having grandparents in a family, (2) the worst thing about having grandparents in a family, (3) qualities of the ideal grandmother, and (4) qualities of the ideal grandfather.

For each of the open-ended questions inquiring about views of grandparents, all responses were examined and dissimilar response categories were identified. The authors then independently categorized responses to each question; inter-rater agreement was 94%. The frequencies of responses in each category for each question were tabulated, and Chi-square tests were used to identify significant associations between response categories and parents' marital status.

FINDINGS

The Best and Worst Things About Having Grandparents in the Family

Parents' marital status was associated with views of the best thing about having grandparents in the family, Chi-square (3) = 6.75, $p < .10$, $C = .25$. A greater percentage of single than married parents' responses described grandparents as valuable because of the advice and support that they could offer. In contrast, a greater percentage of married parents' responses placed grandparents' value in their potential to strengthen or extend families, and in their life experience and knowledge of family heritage. Both married and single parents also said that warm grandparent-grandchild relationships were primary benefits of having grandparents in the family. Table 2 summarizes this analysis.

Insert Table 2 about here

Parents' marital status was not associated with views of the worst thing about having grandparents in the family, Chi-square (5) = 3.68, $p > .10$, $C = .20$. This analysis is summarized in Table 3. Parents most often said that grandparents' advice or interference in grandchildren's upbringing

was the worst thing about having grandparents in the family (44% of all responses); substantially more of single than of married parents' responses referred to advice or interference (see Table 3). Less frequent responses to this question were distance or potential distance in relationships with grandparents (13%); nothing (12%); conflict between grandparents and grandchildren (11%), with substantially more single than married parents citing such conflict (see Table 3); grandparents' evaluations of parents (10%), and conflict between grandparents and parents (9%).

Insert Table 3 about here

The Ideal Grandmother and The Ideal Grandfather

Parents' marital status was not associated with views of the ideal grandmother, Chi-square (4) = 2.39, $p > .10$, $C = .14$. Responses to this question are summarized in Table 4. Parents most often said that the ideal grandmother was a woman who had warm relationships with her grandchildren (42% of all responses to this question); more married than single parents' responses were placed in this category (see Table 4). Parents further said that the ideal grandmother was a woman possessing desireable personal qualities (18%); a greater percentage of single than married parents' responses were so classified. Parents also described the ideal grandmother as a source of support (17%), as one who shares activities with grandchildren (16%), and as one who can offer advice in a constructive manner (7%).

Insert Table 4 about here

Parents' marital status was not associated with views of the ideal grandfather, Chi-square (4) = 1.68, $p > .10$, $C = .12$. As in describing the ideal grandmother, most of parents' responses describing the ideal grandfather referred to warm grandfather-grandchild relationships (34%). In addition, parents said that the ideal grandfather was one who shares activities with grandchildren (32%), one who possesses desireable personal qualities (13%), offers support (13%), and offers advice in a constructive manner (8%). These responses are summarized in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Examination of these parents' responses to open-ended questions has shown that parents' marital status was significantly associated only with views of the best thing about having grandparents in the family. Parents' marital status was not significantly associated with views of the worst thing about having grandparents in the family, with views of the ideal grandmother, or with views of the ideal grandfather. As hypothesized, parents cited grandparents' help and support as desireable qualities, and referred to grandparents' advising as an undesirable quality. Also as hypothesized, single parents more often referred to grandparents' support as a desireable quality than did married parents.

The hypothesis that grandfathers, compared to grandmothers, would be described as more involved and prone to interference in grandchildren's upbringing was only partially supported. Parents more often described grandfathers as sharing activities with grandchildren than grandmothers,

but the most frequently cited characteristic of both the ideal grandmother and the ideal grandfather were warm relationships with grandchildren. The hypothesis that parents would refer to grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's discipline as an undesirable grandparent quality similarly received scant support. Relatively few responses referred in any way to grandparents' involvement in discipline, and parents were only critical of grandparents' administration of unwarranted discipline (coded as grandchild-grandparent conflict).

Single parents' relatively strong endorsement of grandparents' support suggests that the grandparent's family role may be evolving. The findings of classic studies have described grandparents as having minimal responsibilities in grandchildren's upbringing (e.g., Albrecht, 1954; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964). The findings of this study suggest, however, that such a description may not accurately describe the roles of grandparents in single parent families. The number of single parent families in the United States has increased dramatically over the past decade. If single parents do in fact seek advice and support from grandparents more often than do married parents, then more grandparents than ever before are being called upon to assume some level of responsibility in grandchildren's upbringing.

Married parents' views of the best things about having grandparents in the family revealed a strong general endorsement of family solidarity. This value was reflected much less often in single parents' descriptions of advantages of having grandparents in the family. It seems that this association with marital status reflects a global difference in family values. Only one of the single parents was widowed, while the rest were divorced, separated, or never married. It is reasonable to suppose that,

had these single parents valued family solidarity to the same extent as did the married parents, that they might be unhappily married, rather than single, parents.

Parents' view that grandparents' advice and interference were the worst things about having grandparents in the family conform to the findings of earlier qualitative research (Thomas, 1982; 1985), and imply processes of reciprocal intergenerational socialization. Parents' complaints about advising and interference suggest that grandparents attempt to socialize their own children for parenting, with resulting family strain. Since single parents lauded grandparents' advice and support but deplored grandparents' advising and interference, this family strain would appear to be especially problematic for single parents and their parents. In attempting to provide support, grandparents in these families may be perceived as interfering.

Classic descriptions of grandparents have often been based upon the assumption that marked gender differences in grandparenting do not exist (e.g, Caven, 1962; Smith, 1965), although more recent research has identified gender differences in the personal significance of grandparenting (Crawford, 1981; Kivnick, 1982; 1985), in patterns of grandparental influence (Hagestad, 1985), and in grandparenting satisfaction and perceived responsibilities (Thomas, in press). The findings of this study are paradoxically consistent both with the earlier assumption and with the more recent empirical findings. Both ideal grandmothers and ideal grandfathers were most often described as individuals who had warm relationships with grandchildren; in this respect, the "ideal" grandparent was indeed a neuter figure, as early scholars proposed.

Less frequent descriptions of ideal grandmothers and grandfathers, however, outlined roles characterized by support and desireable personal qualities for grandmothers and by activities with grandchildren for grandfathers. Furthermore, parents citing activities with grandchildren as an attribute of the ideal grandparent often specified stereotypically masculine or feminine activities (e.g., grandmother: "bakes cookies for her grandchild", "can bake the best pies and cookies"; grandfather: "can catch a fish anywhere", "teaches his life experiences -- i.e., fishing"). Thus, these parents' views of grandparents also reflected some gender differentiation, although not the specific types of gender differences identified in recent grandparenting research.

The findings of this study represent an important initial step toward an empirical description of the process of socialization for grandparenthood. These findings can be fruitfully extended in several ways. First, parents' contributions to grandparental socialization should be examined much more comprehensively. Associations between additional parental characteristics and views of grandparents should be considered, and means through which parents communicate their views of desireable and undesirable qualities should be identified. Second, other possible agents in the process of socialization for grandparenthood should be identified. It is possible that other grandparents (including one's own grandparents and one's parents as grandparents), grandchildren, and/or the media, for example, are also important contributors to this socialization process. These types of information would mark substantial contributions to a dynamic perspective of grandparenting experience.

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Table 1

Parents' Demographic Characteristics

	Married Parents n=57	Single Parents n=22
Mean Age	33.14	30.68
	(5.04)	(6.50)
Gender		
Female	89%	95%
Male	11%	5%
Mean Number of Children	2.21	1.60
	(.82)	(.86)
Mean Age Oldest Child	8.74	8.30
	(5.06)	(6.23)
Mean Age Youngest Child	4.38	6.75
	(2.99)	(5.65)
Highest Level of Education		
Some High School	2%	0%
High School Degree	18%	14%
Some College	44%	67%
College Degree	23%	9%
Graduate Degree	13%	9%
Employment Status		
Employed	70%	57%
Not Employed	30%	43%

Occupation		
White Collar & Professional	38%	38%
Blue Collar	2%	10%
Service & Clerical	24%	10%
Other	5%	0%
Not Employed	30%	43%
Proximity of Respondent's Parents		
Within 30 Minute Drive	46%	82%
31 - 60 Minute Drive	10%	0%
1 - 4 Hour Drive	15%	0%
4 - 8 Hour Drive	15%	12%
Farther Than 8 Hour Drive	15%	6%
Frequency of Respondent-Parent Contact		
Almost Every Day	8%	41%
1 - 2 Times Per Week	35%	23%
2 - 3 Times Per Month	12%	12%
Every 2 - 3 Months	21%	6%
2 - 3 Times Per Year	19%	18%
Yearly Or Less Often	4%	0%

Note: Standard deviations corresponding to mean values appear in parentheses.

Table 2

The Best Thing About Having Grandparents in a Family Is:

Response Category:	Percent of Married Parents' Responses	Percent of Single Parents' Responses
Sources of advice and support for parents	23%	41%
Strengthen the family	26%	11%
Positive relationships with grandchildren	26%	37%
Life experience and knowledge of family heritage	25%	11%

Chi-square (3) = 6.75, $p < .10$

$C = .25$

Table 3

The Worst Thing About Having Grandparents in a Family Is:

Response Category:	Percent of Married Parents' Responses	Percent of Single Parents' Responses
Interference in childrearing	39%	56%
Grandchild-grandparent conflict	14%	4%
Nothing	14%	8%
Distance in relationships	13%	16%
Criticism/evaluation of parents	11%	8%
Parent-grandparent conflict	9%	8%

Chi-square (5) = 3.68, $p > .10$

$C = .20$

Table 4

The Ideal Grandmother Is One Who:

Response Category:	Percent of Married Parents' Responses	Percent of Single Parents' Responses
Has warm relationships with grandchildren	45%	35%
Has desireable personal qualities	16%	24%
Shares activities with grandchildren	18%	12%
Provides support to parents	15%	21%
Provides constructive childrearing advice	6%	9%

Chi-square (4) = 2.39, $p > .10$

$C = .14$

Table 5

The Ideal Grandfather Is One Who:

Response Category:	Percent of Married Parents' Responses	Percent of Single Parents' Responses
Has warm relationship with grandchildren	35%	30%
Shares activities with grandchildren	33%	30%
Has desireable personal qualities	11%	20%
Provides support to parents	13%	13%
Provides constructive childrearing advice	8%	7%

Chi-square (4) = 1.68, $p > .10$

$C = .12$